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COMFORT AND COMFORTERS.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

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BY

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COMFORT AND COMFORTERS.

I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter, that he may be with you forever. Even the Spirit of Truth. JOHN, xiv. 16.

I AM to speak of the mission of comfort, the comfort which we can give to each other. It is not a month since I met a poor man who has hard lines in the world—who told me, with a certain pride, that he had sought strength and higher life in trouble from the book of Job. He even told me how many chapters he read in a day, as an athlete might tell you how far he ran, or how many pounds he lifted. I was in dismay, for I knew the poor fellow well. He had come to me for comfort, and here was a wretched instance of what comes from the worship of a Book, which had in this case ended in the idolatry of the Bible. Such a man says: "I will try religion,—religion is the cure for all ills,—and for awhile I will take a dose of religion every morning and another every night. Here is the book of Job: I will take five chapters as the day begins and four in the evening."

In truth, as I hope I need not say here, the greater part of that book is the most cynical com-

ment on life, uttered by the friends of Job and sometimes by himself. With the closing chapters come magnificent bursts of sunshine, and by way of preparing for these grand displays the unknown author, with artistic skill, has made the thunder clouds, with whose grumblings the drama begins, of the very darkest hue and with the blackest of shadows. Indeed, I do not remember any worse medicine which my wretched friend could have found for his sorrows, and I knew that so far as I could help him it would be by turning him as far as I could from Job's comforters.

One of the finest ejaculations in the book is that where Job cries out, "Miserable comforters are ye all!"

All the same, you and I are eager to help our friends when their trial is greatest. Understand, that what I am going to say is in absolute sympathy with this wish. I am not now offering what the books call "Helps to Mourners." I shall be glad if I can say something which shall help those who would help them.

I have a right to do this. First of all, here is the magnificent promise of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. Because this Spirit comes, the whole sequence of the New Testament implies that you and I, that all of us here, can help each other with comfort — common force; that all the people in the world can bear each other's burdens. Take

the admirable single instance of Paul in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans. He is a much stronger man than any of us are — who owns to the need of just such common strength. “That I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.” If any one could pray, Paul could. If any one knew by experience what is meant by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, Paul did. Yet in a hundred cases — most of all in the letters written when he is alone in travel — he pours out his need of the sympathy, in his trials, of the others. They are far away. They are poor and ignorant freedmen or slaves, or hard workmen. Yet if they send him a letter or a message it is a precious ointment to him; it is a perfume sweet in receiving and sweet in memory. It is strength in weakness. It is companionship in loneliness. It gives him new strength, and this is the common strength. The strength of all — in the sympathy of all — supplies the lack of his failing being, or it makes him forget the weakness of that eye that does not see well. It soothes the pain of that thorn which always pricks. He was weak without this sympathy. He is strong whenever it has been expressed to him.

The comforters of Job have earned themselves the derision of all time, because they do not offer comfort. Job is crushed by every calamity. Body, mind, and soul — the whole make-up of a man —

are shattered : his body is in agony ; his plans have all failed ; and his heart is broken. Then these people, miscalled friends, come round and begin to reason. They try all the aggravating insults which their kindred, alas, in all time have made familiar ! — “ It was his own fault. He deserved it. It is a punishment for his sins. He never deserved what he had had. God made a mistake when he blessed him ; and now God has corrected that mistake by taking the blessing away. Also, he has worshipped the idols which, oddly enough, God gave him to worship. He has loved them more than he loved God. And that is the reason why they were taken away.” And so on. Few of us have lived thirty years without having suffered under the torments of such visitors, who come to comfort us, they hardly know why, because they must come ; and say, they hardly know what, because they must say something. All this talk of these mechanical consolers comes out in one more merely intellectual effort to solve the problem of evil. Why does a good God permit such sorrow ? How can he be willing to do it ? Now, any of these intellectual solutions are efforts hardly higher in grade than a well-played game of chess. They are worth absolutely nothing in giving that strength to give which ought to be the object of the visit of the so-called friend — as indeed, perhaps, it was.

For there are forces higher than these, higher — as the sky is higher — than this intellectual jugglery commands. The force of Love, of one man's love, or one woman's, the love of your family, the love of your neighbors, the love of your country, the love of mankind, give strength — I do not say happiness — which can lift you up and make you again a child of God. They work this miracle as no intellectual elegance does, as no poetry does, nor argument, nor any of these explanations of the Job's comforter. And whether we try to relieve others, or whether, in our agony, we blindly feel around us for relief, this is what we are to remember, that there is no strength but the common strength, and that this common strength or comfort is born from Love and Love alone.

The only apology for such intellectual dissection, where the heart of the mourner is breaking, is that really the tormentor does not know what he is talking about or what misery he is causing. "He laughs at scars, who never felt a wound!"

Thus people who have never lost a child will drive a wretched mother to distraction from mere ignorance of her misery. Their proffered assistance is like the advice of a man who knows nothing of swimming to a man who is struggling in a swift current. Let this caution the inexperienced counsellor who rashly offers his service in the business of consolation.

Two central realities are to be borne in mind by man or woman who would help one in suffering:

First, As I have said, that no intellectual enterprises are of any worth. They have no place in the affair. You might as well carry new dishes for men to eat, or new clothes for them to wear.

Second, Remember what you are there for. It is not to diminish sorrow. Sorrow is the gate of wisdom. Sorrow is an element of life, which must be, if life is to be true life. If the heart beats, there will be a pulse-throb. If a man lives, there will be sorrow in the crises of his life. You are not there to diminish sorrow.

Sorrow, grief, agony are realities. And no vote of the company that they ought not to exist is going to lighten their pressure or soothe their pang. What the good God offers is strength to bear sorrow. In place of happiness, which is gone, very likely forever, he offers blessedness — he offers the certainty of his infinite help and present stay. And the time comes — not to-day, perhaps, and not to-morrow, but it comes all the same — when he who mourns finds out that the Blessedness is worth more than Happiness. Life is worth more than any one of the separate blossoms which budded and flowered from the roots of Life. The Rock is worth more than the gay pavilion which had been built upon the Rock, which in a tempest has been swept away.

James, who wrote the epistle, is a person of whom we know perhaps nothing else. Whether he be the apostle named in the Gospel is doubtful, and of him we know almost nothing. But one conceives respect for this James, increasing as one tries the experiments of life, based on the sacred common-sense of the axioms in his short epistle. He is writing to Christians who are beginning to feel the pressure of the screw as it is turned by Pharisaic bigotry in Judæa, and by Roman Philistines. To these poor people, everywhere subject to indignity, James writes: "There has no affliction fallen on you but such as is common to all."

Now, this is not that wretched suggestion which one or another Bildad or Elihu makes to Job — that other people are as badly off as he, and therefore he must not complain. James is looking from exactly the other side. He does not urge stoical indifference. But he does mean that no man shall think he is alone. He says to him who is in prison, or under exile, that all humanity is on his side, so far and so surely as good men know of his trial. All of them are willing to share in the effort for his relief. They can count his tears. They know the weight of his affliction. You are not alone. You have the common strength of a multitude who know what sorrow is. And so far as men are within your regard, you may be sure of their help and sympathy.

Freeman Clarke was once describing to me his

experience when he lost his beautiful boy. "It seemed as if everybody in Boston wanted to lift my burden for me. The best men in Boston were only too glad if they could carry an errand for me. I felt that I lived on angels' food." He did live on angels' food. He knew in the midst of his deepest agony what is the foundation blessing: the Rock on which God's kingdom is to be builded. This Rock is Love. And in that experience of the Love of those around a man or woman in personal agony shall learn the lesson of Love's omnipotence.

No, I cannot explain the cause which has permitted this or that epidemic in which my darling child has died. No, I do not know by what fault or whose the steamship has been flung against the cliff, so that I shall never even see the bodies of my darlings. But there are many other things which I cannot explain, and which I never attempt to explain. My business in life does not seem to be explaining. This becomes to me more clear and more that I am not alone in my experience. Lydia and Dorcas and Miriam and Martha here have tried the same trial, have wept with the same tears. They are here to lift me who have fallen. They are here to weep as I weep. And the Saviour of men Himself wept with me in such a parting. He could see God as the pure in heart see Him, and lived in a present heaven. He was acquainted with our infirmities. He was tried

with our temptations. He sorrowed as we sorrow, Man of Sorrows indeed. And this means, this teaches, that all of us, whether we have or have not seen each other's faces or know each other's names, all of us can and will help every man his brother. The carpenter encourages the goldsmith: he that useth the hammer, and him that beats upon the anvil. I do not tread this vine-press alone. Behind me, before me, at my right hand and at my left, are those who are bereaved, who would so gladly help me; and I, as God lives, I will as gladly help them. My sorrow is lonely sorrow no longer. And as all mankind shares that with me, I will for all mankind consecrate my life. I am not alone, and I will not think I am.

Are you so doubtful, then, what you shall say, or what you shall write, when, as the Jewish women around Mary and Martha, you feel that you must "console," as people say, him or her who is in agony?

First, Remember this, that they are entitled to their grief. Grief has its rights. One is, that if I choose I may be alone.

Second, Remember that sorrow is sorrow, is meant to be sorrow, and that it is no affair of yours or mine to say it is joy. It is only by a figure of speech that we are even to thank God for our afflictions. You do not go to your friend, you do not write to him, to prove to him that there is no pang.

Third, God himself can give to him in this agony Himself, His own presence, His own Holy Spirit; and God himself can do no more. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter and the only Comforter.

The way which God chooses to do this is to show me or you, or whoever is in tears, that he is not alone. He is brother with so many brothers and sisters. She is sister with so many sisters and brothers. We are knit together, heart with heart, soul with soul; tear with tear flow into one; just as in times of joy, joy is doubled and doubled and doubled if I share my joy with those who rejoice. Here is what I can do; here is what I can say. I can say I am sorry. Perhaps I can say, from my own experience, "I know what your sorrow is." This is all that I can say, or have a right to say.

This limitation silences nine-tenths of the jargon of the books printed for mourners, and of the counsel administered by the Job's comforters of whatever generation. But the truth which remains is the pure gold of human sympathy. It is the breath of the common life, in which we are all one. It gives to me the certainty that the whole world of God and of man is on my side. And I, if I will open my eye to see who is in want, if I will open my ear to hear his wail, I can give to him at least the courage which he gave me. I can help him as he has helped me, as we bear each other's burdens.

In the end of the Gospel, in that parting of which the words alone were enough to make the Last Supper a Sacrament of all time, Jesus begs the Apostles, in all their trials, to stand by each other: Keep my commandments if you love me. Love one another as I have loved you. And then my father shall give you a Comforter. Why, my father will love the man who keeps my word, and we will come and make our abode with him! Thus is it that the earth is to be made Heaven. Thus is it that the home of God is to be in the home of men. "I saw a new Heaven and a new Earth. For God shall dwell with them; they shall be his people. And he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes." When we can bear each other's burdens, when we really sorrow with each other's sorrows, when we really love each his brother, then the Holy Spirit comes, who is the Comforter.

